DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 320 CS 203 033

AUTHOR Nakadate, Neil
TITLE The Decomposition of the Liberal Arts, the Liberalization of Composition, and an Alternative Course.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Composition Skills (Literary); *Educational Needs; Educational Philosophy; *English Education; Higher Education; *Humanities Instruction; Liberal Arts; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

At the college level, teachers of composition and teachers of literature have, with regard to educational goals and philosophy, been drifting apart for years. All too often, basic literature courses and combined literature and composition courses, as well as humanities instruction in general, have fallen prey to popularization. Teachers must realize that contemporary literature exists within the context of past literary works and must teach accordingly. The teaching of writing, the act which both groups hold in common, must also be stressed. (KS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

Neil Nakadate
Department of English
University of Texas
Austin, Texas 78712

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Neil Nakadate

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

ED130320

The Decomposition of the Liberal Arts, the Liberalization of Composition, and an Alternative Course

This paper originated in my awareness, shared by many in our profession, of two related phenomena which are of particular significance to teachers of college writing. These phenomena are the crisis in the liberal arts and what has been called (by more than a few, and with some elation) the new status of Freshman English. I felt the need to express myself because I believed, and still believe, that many institutions and departments are failing to serve the liberal arts well and that many are not really doing much to earn and stabilize the new status of Freshman English. This is, finally, a time of both crisis and promise, and we have a chance to do better by our obligations and opportunities.

In particular, I believe that in liberalizing Freshman English--in making it personal, affective, and experiential, "popular", and perhaps a half-dozen other things which aren't in themselves bad, we've been much too willing to set aside our long and long-cherished relationship with the liberal arts tradition, such as it has been able to manifest itself in modern times. Specifically, we have in many instances been acquiescent, and finally

CS 203 033

irresponsible, in abandoning readings from the wide-ranging and sometimes "unpopular" tradition of western literature when the use of such sources of student and teacher experience may well be the enabling act in what is for many in the field of English a period of pedagogical paralysis. We have also abandoned--and this is a crucial corollary--those of our colleagues for whom the literature of tradition is the central, if not sole concern.

Let's look at the historical record for a moment. As James L. Kinneavy explained in a paper delivered before the Rocky Mountain MLA in 1974, a long view of Western Civilization reveals what we might call the decomposition of the liberal arts. He pointed out that in Antiquity language skills, and rhetoric in particular, were the acknowledged crux of higher education; the disciplines of Aristotle, Plato, Isocrates, and the Alexandria scholars emphasized logic, dialectic, and even literature, with rhetoric or oral persuasion finally the dominant mode. But the primacy of Antiquity's liberal arts declined, beginning with the Middle Ages, so that the language skills once considered the touchstones of higher education now constitute only a narrow portion of the college curriculum. As for English departments themselves, logic, dialectic, and in some

cases even rhetoric having left our purview, not much remains. Kinneavy concludes that--and I use his phrase--"the residue is pure literature and the curious appendage of freshman composition." In other words, what we now call departments of English, and particularly lower-division English, seem to be either a shrinking enclave or the last stronghold of the liberal arts, depending on the spirit in which one whishes to assess the situation.

More recently, or course, we have identified the so-called crisis in the Humanities, our new name for what's left of the liberal arts. December 1974, John H. Fisher delivered a Presidential Address to the 89th Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association, in which he observed "the widening chasm between the values represented by the MLA and the cultural and intellectual interests of our society," and made the assertion that "the real problems of our profession must be solved in our individual institutions and departments." In the summer of 1975, an entire issue of Change was devoted to "The State of the Humanities," clearly under the assumption that that state was at the very best a problematical one. In November 1975, Steven Marcus wrote, in the Chronicle of Higher Education, of what he called "The Demoralized Humanists." And in College English for November 1975, Mel A. Topf lamented that

the National Endowment for the Humanities seems to be contributing to, rather than reducing, the confusion and the crisis. What Kinneavy tells us is that our current state is the product of a long process of decline. What the writers for Change, The Chronicle, and College English have in common is the observation that humanists and the Humanities are in a state of confusion, if not disarray; that they do not have a clear sense of their disciplines and responsibilities and roles, with respect to either the past or the future, their tradition or their students; and that humanists and humanities should not look with any real hope to either the sciences or the national government for the inspiration or leadership which will lead to what Marcus calls "critical self-clarification and appraisal."

Both conclusions cited above--those of Kinneavy and of the cluster of other commentators I have mentioned--can be verified by a look at the English Departments of many American colleges and universities today--particularly four-year institutions. A glance down the hallway reveals two basic kinds of faculty. On one hand, a large body of literature specialists, men and women who have in fact been trained to offer publication of scholarship as a defense against confusion, exclusion, and oblivion. On the other hand, a small body of composition specialists and a phalanx of equally committed TA's, concerned

with the teaching of a vital basic skill which is at once a subject, a service, and a survival tool, but who themselves, and sometimes of their own defensiveness, occasionally personify the sad truth that no one is immune to intellectual entrenchment and pedagogical smugness. At their worst, these two faculty types differ from each other much less than they resemble the high-heeled and low-heeled partisans of Part I of Gulliver's Travels, locked in factional poses which make them figures of farce and objects of the satirist's art. At their best, however, these two types, while retaining meaningful distinctions, can be complementary resources in the student's pursuit of a liberal education in general and thinking and writing skills in particular. More on this after a brief look at another kind of record.

At the University of Texas, which I here take to be typical of four-year public institutions, we had about 22,000 undergraduate enrollments in Humanities courses in the Fall of 1975. This accounted for about 16 per cent of all undergraduate enrollments. Of these 22,000 Humanities enrollments, 11,100 or about 50 per cent were in English. And of these 11,100, 5,000 or 45 per cent were in Freshman Composition and 4,400 or 40 per cent were in introductory literature. In other words, 85 per cent of all English enrollments and 43 per cent of

all Humanities enrollments at Texas were in elementary English courses. In fact, such courses constitute the bulk of the English offerings and Humanities requirements at most post-secondary institutions. And in many cases, they have absolutely no relationship to one another--except for the prevailing tendency among most faculty to prefer literature and avoid composition.

What I wish to suggest, however, is that literature, certainly the primary concern of most four-year college English departments--and not likely to willingly accept a secondary role in any foreseeable future--is one of the most immediate, accessible, and perhaps necessary allies to composition teachers in their effort not only to establish competence and encourage style, but also to offer a sense of the tradition, flexibility, resilience, and range of discourse--and in particular the on-going challenge to the life of the mind presented by the written word. My point is that we could do worse, by both our students and the humanistic tradition of which we and they are the custodians of a viable if fragmentary part, than offer them readings which are sometimes impersonal and perhaps even alien, which now seem ineluctably the province of the printed word, and which might seem so unconnected to the present moment as to appear useless to anybody's "cause." I

have in mind readings such as Beowulf and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Hard Times and "Areopagitica."

You will have detected that my point rests on the basic (and thus far implicit) assumption that just as we have shifted to make composition itself more personal and popular and relevant, we have shifted toward the modern, if not the contemporary, in our nurturing of the complementary reception skills, as based on particular kinds of readings. All too often our basic literature courses, and our combined literature and composition courses, have been modernized and popularized in style and content. The results are, incidentally, usually courses in the contemporary rather than courses in contemporary literature, and courses in contemporary literature rather than courses in writing. In fact, what my upper-division literature students tell me, through the production of far too many narrowly conceived and poorly grounded papers, is that their basic instruction in literature and language and the writer's craft has taken place in a cultural vacuum.

My handling of both culture and the contemporary--the unpopular and the pop--in the previous paragraph may suggest to some that I am a partisan of the publish-or-perish stripe and engaged in subversive activity in addressing teachers of writing. I can only assert

that I am not, but at the same time I must hasten to add that those of my colleagues concerned with composition and popular culture, experiential and expressive writing, individualized instruction, and the linguistic dilemmas of minority or disadvantaged students are--precisely because of their unique pedagogical charge and the bifurcation of English departments in recent years--obliged to suggest fruitful remedies rather than bend to a more energetic cultivation of their own gardens. What I have to suggest, then, is a way for us to reestablish discourse with the many members of our profession who are at this moment untutored, uncommitted, and unengaged in the teaching of composition. Specifically: a writing course which grows out of the matrix of the popular and the unpopular, to be team-taught by one new-school composition specialist and one old-school literature specialist; the readings would juxtapose the contemporary and the classic but share thematic, generic, or rhetorical characteristics. Selections from Norman Mailer's Existential Errands, for example, might shed some light on Hamlet, and vice versa, and Oedipus might illuminate Heart of Darkness. Thomas Paine's The Crisis might put propaganda within a provocative historical frame, and as such enforce the distinction between persuasion and argument for any writing teacher inclined to affirm the primacy of the expressive

at the expense of the well thought-out. And the teacher of the Nun's Priest's Tale would, ipso facto, offer a rationale for the study of a troublesome dialect--in fact the dialect which Chaucer himself helped to "popularize" --a rationale which might be appreciated by dialect-conscious students in their search for audience, acceptability, and self. But in any instance, two colleagues of "different" disciplines would help each other recall the key problems of reading, thinking, and writing revealed in any assessment of the literary act.

In such a course, both composition and literature teachers might have to construct an overview of the vanishing tradition of which they both are still recognizable parts, and might recollect as teachers, to the benefit of their students, T. S. Eliot's preceptive observations in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The advocate of what one observer has called "The Tradition of the New" is reminded that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead." The advocate of established canons and tastes is warned that "the necessity that the artist shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what

happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them." Surely a productive dialogue will be generated in the matrix created by Beowulf and Jaws, Virginia Woolf and All the President's Men; that is, some way to revitalize, and in some cases introduce, a sense of the problems and possibilities, aims and audiences in the craft of using words.

This essay began with a disquisition on the liberal arts, which I quickly equated with the Humanities, and by extension with Departments of English, and finally with composition and introductory literature. But what it has turned into finally is an elaborate response to pedagogical stances within the profession as they have developed in the face of various outside pressures and our own inner impulses to self-sufficiency and preservation. And in the final analysis my course proposal is, as much as anything, a heuristic device to suggest that teachers of writing actively engage in helping to broaden the teaching bases of the faculties of which they are parts, on the assumption that while good teaching cannot be legislated, a generous spirit for the teaching of writing can in fact be sought. Teachers of composition

and teacners of literature, each group often teaching as if the other did not exist, have been drifting apart for more years that it is pleasant to count; it is time that they exposed each other's personae and unquestioned assumptions, remembered that it is the act of writing which makes both their stations possible, and got back together again.

I urge this reunion with energy, perhaps even with urgency, but not yet with despair; as Robert Frost once pointed out, "It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down before the worst forces ever mobilized by God."